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JACK VALENTI: Crippling the CIA and FBI

Point of View

This is not going to be applauded in the dining salons of my East Side Manhattan liberal friends, but somehow I cannot shake the queasy notion that we — as a nation, goaded by well-intentioned people — are systematically destroying the ability of the CIA and the FBI to function effectively in the long-range best interests of this country.

It is politically given that denouncing "dirty tricks in Chile" and the alleged blunders and felonies that are ascribed to every action, real or imagined, of the CIA are guarantees of maximum publicity.

Moreover, one need say only "J. Edgar" and the senses are stunned by an emotional avalanche of black-bag treachery and stealthy bureaucratic Machiavellianism. Mr. Hoover's critics are of a piece with Anglican clergyman Hurrell Froude who when speaking about a sullied archbishop who met his end by being fried to a crisp at the stake, said: "The only good thing I know of Cranmer is that he burnt well."

There is little doubt that Hoover not only "burnt well" but, even worse, he stayed too long. With his apotheosis, he became crotchety and overbearing (when mortals assume divinity there is a noticeable loss of humility). But one need not embrace Hoover lovingly to point out that the FBI over a long stretch of time has been and remains the most professional and highly motivated police force in the world.

During my three years as a White House assistant under President Johnson, I discovered the work of the FBI and the CIA was in-

variably superior. Both made errors but their excellence more than outweighed their laxities. To find this quality confounds the rhetoric of so many who distrust and despise both organizations.

During the great intra-government debates of 1965 when the decisions to intrude more troops into Vietnam were taken, it was the CIA's estimates which time has shown to be most nearly correct. If the agency's dour assessments were overlooked or over-ridden the CIA cannot be faulted. It did its job.

If the CIA was deployed into areas and into events that later lacerated their reputation one must understand that Higher Authorities instructed the CIA and, once again, it did its job as ordered.

To rawhide the FBI for the latter-day imperfections of an old man, implacable, grown to legend, is to misplace the location of what Lytton Strachey in another context referred to as the "seats and nurseries of vice."

The fact, as any sober intelligence will perceive, is that the FBI is still the best police force in being; with a spirit-shrunken, unevenly motivated FBI, we would be less than slightly under-guarded in a more than substantially unsafe society.

And while it is not inappropriate for the CIA to place faith in the abstruse technology of satellites and laser beams and whatever else is now possible, most experienced observers agree that an alert and effective intelligence gathering organization is needed more than ever. Is it really a confirmation of idealism to be blind and mute in a world seething with rude uncertainties?

Yet the virulent shredding of the FBI and the CIA — both those groups —

From my intimate government experience I count the steady, exhausting blows on the FBI and CIA to be the first assaults on the way to an irretrievable national blunder. The world and this nation are sometimes a collection of not very nice neighborhoods. Moreover, in our free and liberty-loving land it is not possible (nor would we choose it to be possible) to deal sternly, summarily and finally with either criminals or spies as is done with such dispatch in totalitarian countries.

Therefore, if we strip the CIA and FBI raw, if we so foul their environment that no professional would want to risk his life and his family's for a flimsy gratitude or a shaky cause, if no person would be willing (for whatever reason) to tell either group something that he or she knew that might be of value in appraising an enemy or identifying a criminal since no file is safe from intrusive eyes, then we will be, by intent and conditioned judgment, collapsing our once-professional intelligence gathering and our once proud and incorruptible investigatory police force. How sure then would we be that justice, however slow, would be readily available — until it is all too late to measure?

It is wrong to blind the CIA and to stunt the FBI. It is wrong because the alternatives are so meager.

Mr. Valenti is the president of the Motion Picture Association of America.